



**NORTHERN ARIZONA
UNIVERSITY**
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Pecha Kucha for Lean and Sticky Presentations in Business Classes

Working Paper Series— 12-03 | February 2012

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The most time consuming and difficult way to understand complex ideas is to have to decipher a lengthy report filled with technical descriptions, business jargon, and tables of data. More efficient is the visual approach – ‘a picture is worth a thousand words.’ (Liker, 2004, p. 244)

We assigned Pecha Kucha presentations for group projects and individual book reviews. Students reported spending more time practicing and audience members described the presentations as more enjoyable than traditional presentations. Pecha Kucha is a presentation format that originated in 2003 in Tokyo, Japan in an event evening created by Mark Dytham and Astrid Klein as a venue for designers and architects to present their work in an engaging format. The structured format is comprised of 20 slides each shown for 20 seconds for a presentation that lasts 6 minutes and 40 seconds. The slides are graphic images with little to no text which are automatically advanced.

Communication skills continue to be the most highly-sought skills among surveyed employers hiring MBAs (86%), nearly 20% ahead of the second most highly-sought skill, strategic skills (67%) (GMAC, 2011). Oral communication in business and the business classroom frequently implies a PowerPoint presentation, though there are other variations like podcasting (Armstrong, et al., 2009) and video presentations for on-line learning (Green, 2008). As Garret Reynolds prescribes (Reynolds, 2008), there are three components to developing a presentation: slides that the audience will see, notes that only the presenter will see, and handouts that the audience will take with them. Unfortunately, students and professionals alike frequently default to simply preparing the PowerPoint slides, leading to the type of presentations that have earned various names and descriptive phrases such as such as “Death by PowerPoint” (Garber, 2001), “PowerPoint is Evil” (Tufte, 2003), and “PowerPoint makes you dumb” (Thompson, 2003). The latter two articles are based on Edward Tufte’s essay “The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint” which warns of the dangers of PowerPoint presentations as more than boredom. Tufte suggests that the NASA presentations to review the status of the Columbia shuttle were so poorly structured and the bullet points so cryptic that it could be considered part of the reason for the disaster.

More recently, the U. S. military has also been experiencing presentation issues demonstrated by a widely-distributed slide that displays the complexity of the American strategy in Afghanistan (Bumiller, 2010). General James Matthis was quoted as saying “PowerPoint makes us stupid” (Bumiller, 2010, ¶ 4). General H. R. McMaster elucidated further that, “It’s dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control” (Bumiller, 2010, ¶ 5).

Finally, few would dispute the presentation prowess of Apple’s Steve Jobs. He was well known for his disdain for the traditional PowerPoint presentation as represented in this excerpt from Walter Isaacson’s recent biography (2011):

One of the first things Jobs did during the product review process was ban PowerPoints. “I hate the way people use slide presentations instead of thinking,” Jobs later recalled. “People would confront a problem by creating a presentation. I wanted them to engage, to hash things out at the table, rather than show a bunch of slides. People who know what they’re talking about don’t need PowerPoint.” (p. 336)

Despite its critics, PowerPoint appears to be here to stay. And many supporters, including Robert Gaskins, one of the designers of PowerPoint, suggests that many of the criticisms leveled at PowerPoint are the same as the criticisms of presentations before PowerPoint, such as unclear bullet points and speakers reading their slides (Gaskins, 2007). Given its pervasiveness and its apparent staying power, working with students to develop PowerPoint presentations is a frequent topic in business education

journals (Baker and Thompson, 2004; Bayless, 2004; Gareis, 2007; Mahin, 2004; Williams, 2004). Criticism is still common, addressing misuse and bad habits (Cyphert, 2004; DuFrene & Lehman, 2004; Macer, 2011; Vik, 2004). Pecha Kucha, a relative newcomer in PowerPoint presentation style, is beginning to appear in classrooms (Bang-Jensen, 2010; Gries & Brooke, 2010) and corporations (Chikushi et al., 2009; Lehtonen, 2011).

Pecha Kucha underscores the confluence of ideas we have been promoting to our students: applying lean thinking and sticky concepts to communication. Managers and bosses don't have time to spend poring over verbose reports and memos. We ask students to apply lean thinking to their communication – does each sentence add value, can the message be portrayed visually, do you understand the root cause of the problem? Using A3 reports for case analysis is an example of this style of classroom communication (Anderson, Morgan, & Williams, 2011). As pointed out by Heath & Heath in *Made to Stick* (2007), many messages don't get through to the receiver or are not long retained. Heath and Heath present a SUCCEs framework for building sticky messages: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, and using stories. The magic of Pecha Kucha is that both of these communication strategies, lean and sticky, are potentially achieved by following this presentation structure. The format is short, focused, and planned – every slide must add value and the visual aspect and pace help to make it engaging and sticky.

One of the strengths of the Pecha Kucha is that it is applicable to a variety of presentation types. Gries & Brooke (2010) have used it in a composition class much like a draft to achieve focus and clarity. Students write a draft of their argument paper then are required to develop a Pecha Kucha presentation of their argument. Then they return to the written paper and produce the final version. Gries and Brooke report that the presentation format seems to help students strengthen and revise their arguments, producing a stronger final product. Chikushi, et al., 2009 suggested that it might also be used as a thesis presentation format, requiring a student to provide an overview of the project allowing a lengthier question and answer defense period. The format is appropriate for a research project presentation to a general audience such as that reported in Stoblein and Kanet (2008) who describe using Pecha Kucha presentations for undergraduate student research projects in an operations management course. At the end of the project, students are asked to present in a student research conference and university symposium. Finally, since the format is applicable to a variety of presentation types, it can be used across the curriculum.

Implementing Pecha Kucha into class presentations

We have now used Pecha Kucha presentations in three different classes:

- Two sections of an undergraduate International Management class (MGT 405, Fall 2010) presented Pecha Kuchas for project presentations. Self-selected student teams of 5 – 6 chose international management topics related to the course, such as “Corruption in International Business” and “KFC in China.” They submitted a written term project report of approximately 20 pages discussing their topic, and delivered a Pecha Kucha presentation to the class.
- Our integrated MBA course, Managing People and Processes (BA 652, Spring 2011), presented individual Pecha Kuchas of book reviews. The students were required to read a book outside of class that they had selected, which related to salient course topics. As a team-taught class focusing on management issues and information technology systems in organizations, their choices represented a wide range, while still appropriate to course topics.
- A cross-disciplinary, team-taught course, Implementing Sustainability (MGT/ENV 499, Fall 2011), required student groups to present research for their class projects. The groups were implementing sustainable projects at the university. Project requirements included scanning other universities' websites to see what others had done related to their NAU project. For example, one group was working to implement waste-free events in NAU's football stadium. They learned (to their surprise) that several universities had already successfully implemented waste-free events in

much larger stadiums and they learned about what worked well and what didn't. This information was presented to the class as Pecha Kuchas.

To introduce the students to a presentation style that they have never seen before, let alone used, we used a variety of techniques including professor presentation of a Pecha Kucha on business in South Africa, a student presentation of a previously prepared Pecha Kucha, showing in class a video of Pecha Kucha, and showing in class a Pecha Kucha about how to make a Pecha Kucha presentation. Students were also directed to investigate pecha-kucha.org and the web for additional resources. Further, students were provided a handout of tips for quality Pecha Kuchas (see Appendix A) and a description of how to automatically advance slides in PowerPoint.

The presentations in all classes were evaluated by the professors and by a cross-section or all of student audience members, with scores averaged across evaluators to obtain a final score for each presentation. In addition, the MBA presentations were video-recorded, so that students could review their performance at a later time. (See appendix B for Evaluation Form).

Evidence of Effectiveness

Students in the international management and graduate classes were surveyed about their reactions to the Pecha Kuchas compared to traditional style presentations, both as presenters and as audience members. Response rate in the undergraduate classes was 100% (75 responses) as the surveys were collected on the presentation day. In the graduate class, the response rate was 70% (16 responses). When asked if they would choose to use the format in a future presentation, 75% of the undergraduate students and 94% of the graduate students responded positively (Table 1). From a presenter's point of view, students indicated that Pecha Kucha presentation preparation took longer, was more difficult, and they spent more time practicing. Undergraduate students spent twice as long practicing the Pecha Kucha than the time they would anticipate they would have spent for a traditional presentation. Graduate students spent nearly 3 times as much time practicing. As an audience member, students felt that there was about the same amount of information in the Pecha Kuchas as a traditional presentation but enjoyed the Pecha Kucha style more than a traditional one.

Table 1 Pecha Kucha Format Survey Summary

	UG Group project		MBA Bookreview		Key	
	Average	Std Dev	Average	Std Dev	1	5
Responses	75		16			
Would you use Pecha Kucha again?	75.4%		93.8%			
Recommend its use for this class?	87.0%		93.8%			
<i>Presenter: Preparation time</i>	3.44	1.00	4.29	0.58	Shorter	Longer
<i>Presenter: Preparation difficulty</i>	3.70	0.88	4.11	0.48	Less	More
<i>Audience: Amount of information</i>	2.97	0.77	3.36	0.65	Less	More
<i>Audience: Enjoyable presentation</i>	3.79	0.89	4.51	0.50	Less	More
<i>Presenter: Amount of time practicing Pecha Kucha (hrs)</i>	3.28	2.67	4.88	3.44		
<i>Presenter: Amount of time practicing traditional (hrs)</i>	1.64	1.00	1.69	1.92		

We surveyed the students with open-ended questions to determine what they perceived were the best and the worst things about Pecha Kucha presentations. For the best things about Pecha Kuchas:

- a) Students frequently noted the pictures and the visual interest that was generated by Pecha Kuchas. A few examples from their comments: The visuals were better than in a normal PowerPoint; I liked seeing more pictures than words.
- b) The fact that the timing was limited was seen by many as a positive. A sub-theme that emerged was that there was no opportunity for presenters to run over in their time, due to the automatic constraint in the slide show. Examples of these responses include: The timing, and the fact that

everyone had to respect it; The time limit, some people like to ramble on, and this took away the ability to do that; From an audience perspective – the only content discussed was relevant and interesting.

- c) The faster pace of the Pecha Kucha presentation maintained the attention of the audience better than the traditional format. Some examples of their responses include: Very quick and effective; Short and to the point and kept [audience] attention the whole time; Fun, high energy and short.
- d) The constraint on the amount of information that could be included compelled the presenters to prioritize what they shared with the audience. Examples include: Only information that adds value; Forced people to provide only relevant information; It forces the presenter to prioritize, then communicate the important points concisely and efficiently.

In contrast to the best things about Pecha Kucha, several common themes appeared in response to what was worst about it.

- a) Many students noted the negative about the timing components of this format as the worst thing. Examples of these responses include: Less quality because of the “fight against time.” No time to explain more specifics; It was oppressive trying to keep within the time limit; Timing was hard to grasp; Twenty seconds is short and terrifying.
- b) Similar to the timing constraint, the constraints on content were seen by many as negative. Examples include: No time to explain more specifics; It is difficult to select which information is going to be used; Limited coverage of important topics; Time crunch – it’s tough to portray all the information; Not everything was covered (rushed).
- c) The need for more practice than in the traditional presentation format. Students’ comments included: Involves too much pointless practicing; Needed to learn slides by heart – took way longer; If the presenters weren’t practiced, it resulted in weak presentations; Not everyone practiced enough.

In comments about whether they would choose to use the Pecha Kucha presentation style or whether it should be required again in the class, both undergraduate and graduate students thought the format was useful for “concept” presentations, to attract a client’s attention, for introduction of new ideas or products and as a lead-in to a more comprehensive presentation. However, both groups viewed the format as not appropriate for in-depth presentations, especially those analyzing financial data. And one graduate student commented that the cost of additional preparation and practice time was not outweighed by the added value of the Pecha Kucha presentations.

Both groups found the presentation format was a good skill to add to their management toolbox whether or not they used the specific format again – the skills developed by using the format would be useful in any presentation. “It was the most developmental [presentation] exercise we engaged in. Earlier stuff focused on posture and space, was necessary, but this took it to the next level.” One undergraduate student commented, “I’m in the Air Force ROTC program and I will be leading and mentoring a group of 15 freshmen next semester. Giving good presentations is an important part of ROTC and I think Pecha-Kucha will make standard briefings seem much easier.” As another student summarized simply, “It made me a better presenter.”

In general comments about the Pecha Kuchas, undergraduates wanted more guidance and clearer expectations about this new-to-them style of presentation. They also preferred two presenters over one presenter for team presentations, in what one student referred to as the “ping pong.” The graduate students made comments that requiring the format multiple times in the semester would have been useful so that they had an opportunity to try the format again – applying lessons learned and in the vein of continuous improvement (a theme of the class). Finally, comments as an audience member are well

summarized by the following comment, “It is immensely more entertaining for the audience – sometimes sitting through presentation after presentation is painful, but the Pecha Kucha went by in a flash!”

As the students have noted, the Pecha Kucha is not appropriate for all presentations, in particular, in-depth, analytical, and detail-oriented presentations. In addition, the positive reaction of the students may be partially due to the newness of the approach. If this were an approach that they encountered in many classes then the enthusiasm for the approach may have been less notable, especially from the audience. In addition, if the students were more experienced with the technique it might not require so much extra time to prepare.

From the professors’ points of view, there was a definite advantage to having the automatically limited time-frame. There was no need to keep time and no presentations had to be interrupted. Pecha Kuchas appeared to generate a higher level of interest from the audience and a higher energy level from the presenters.

Conclusion

Our experiences using Pecha Kuchas in three different business classes have been described. Overall, students and professors have responded positively to this presentation style. As presenters, students found the time and content constraints challenging. As audience members, students found the presentations generally more enjoyable, lively, and engaging. Finally, from personal experience with Pecha Kuchas, the professors have noted that as we prepare for presentations at conferences, classes, and other venues, the visual, lean, and sticky characteristics of Pecha Kuchas are creeping into our more traditional presentations. If students are affected in the same way as their professors with more awareness of the visual, lean, and sticky aspects of all of their presentations – Pecha Kuchas are worthwhile to bring into the classroom. Whether students use a Pecha Kucha presentation again or not, the emphasis on visual and engaging communication that needs to be focused and skills that need to be practiced can be applied to any presentation.

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Appendix 1

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE PECHA-KUCHA PRESENTATIONS

What **to avoid** in a Pecha Kucha:

1. Don't use too much text
2. Avoid bullet points
3. Avoid reading directly from the slides
4. Avoid images that don't advance your topic or contribute meaningful visual information
5. Avoid text-to-image relations that would take more than 20 seconds to digest (i.e. overly crowded slides will be a blur in a Pecha Kucha, unless you want to create a sense of "blur" intentionally)
6. While a consistent slide design is good, avoid most PowerPoint templates. Neutral backgrounds and easy to read fonts are best.

Then, what you **should consider** in a good Pecha Kucha:

1. Consider your 20 slides as 20 panels in a graphic storyline. How do they flow together to create a cohesive statement or a consistent through-line?
2. Consider the impact of text on your audience – Are there single words or short phrases that capture the essence of what you are saying in that 20 second time span?
3. Consider your images very carefully. In a Pecha Kucha, images are frequently the only information on the entire slide. Yes, visual data is just as valuable as textual data. [A well-chosen picture can be worth a thousand words](#). Why did you select that image? Did you manipulate an image you found to make it even more compelling and precise? Would it be better if you cropped the image? Have you considered why you selected this image and not another one? How does this image connect to other images in your slide set?
4. Don't use slide transitions. Use direct cuts from slide to slide. Avoid all dissolves, or clever transitions like "curtains" or "barn doors."
5. Avoid sounds or video clips. There just isn't time, and these features are just distracting in a Pecha Kucha. Your voice is your sound instrument in this presentation.
6. What is your design style? What is connecting these 20 panels? Is there a similar textual strategy? A consistent visual design? Are you playing with or against audience expectations? Have you completely considered the arrangement of these 20 slides? Why did you select the order that you did?
7. Rehearse your spoken remarks. Twenty seconds is a very short period of time. It's easy to end up speed-talking as the slides change. A good Pecha Kucha is not about talking faster or talking over the wrong slide. Timing is of the essence and practice really helps. Your slideshow is on automatic advance, so the slide will change in 20 seconds, ready or not. Think about how your slides and your spoken remarks match up. They are two parts of a whole, and a successful Pecha Kucha is both well designed and well spoken. In many ways, you should consider yourself a performer, and you are attempting to deliver a compelling performance.

Adapted From: Remixing the Humanities
Richard L. Edwards' Blog on Remix and Mashup Culture

Appendix B

BA 652 Friday 5/6/2011
PECHA-KUCHA BOOK REVIEW

PRESENTER and/or BOOK TITLE:

Reviewer's Name (Required to Count in Scoring):

Students' scores will be averaged and combined with Profs' scores for the presentation totals for each presenter.
 Level ratings won't be used in scoring – be honest and fair.
 PS: Don't rate yourself, ok?

O U T S T A N D I N G	A B O V E	A V E R A G E	N E E D S	N O T
	A V E R A G E		I M P R O V E M E N T	A P P L I C A B L E
100 95 -----	90 ---- ----	80 ---- ----		

<i>CHARACTERISTICS</i>	<i>EVALUATION</i>				
1. Strong opening: Main ideas and points well-introduced					
2. Professionalism: Appearance; enthusiasm; motivation					
3. Body language: Effective supporting gestures, movement, posture, and facial expressions					
4. Oral communication skills: Clarity; Word choice; Brevity					
5. Organization of the material					
6. Apparent preparation					
7. PECHA-KUCHA Presentation Style: Smooth and fluid; Followed the Pecha-Kucha structure					
8. Content: Topic well-covered and sticky; Audience learned about the book; Presenter demonstrated knowledge					
9. PECHA-KUCHA Visual aids: Slides are clear, relevant, professional, and easy to read; Writing is flawless					
10. Positive close: Wrap up was well-orchestrated and effective					
11. If Questions: Effectively & professionally answered?					

OVERALL PERCEPTION %: _____

COMMENTS:

Top strengths:

Areas for improvement: